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TAGS: PGOV KDEM PREL VE
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: WINNERS AND LOSERS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶11. (C) Summary. The National Electoral Council (CNE) officially declared President Chavez the winner of the December 3 election on December 5; he was re-elected for six more years. While the presidential election did not usher in any tectonic shifts, it did reveal some clear winners and losers. Chavez is already trumpeting the wide margin of his victory, 63 percent to 37 percent, over Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales, as justification for intensifying the "Bolivarian revolution" and launching "Socialism in the 21st Century." Moreover, Chavez' Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) supporters are laying the groundwork to absorb the many minor pro-Chavez parties into one single "revolutionary" party.

¶12. (C) By dint of his smart and courageous campaign, Rosales has become a nationwide opposition leader who is better positioned than anyone to keep the fractious opposition united. His regional Un Nuevo Tiempo Party polled well and appears ready to go national. The opposition Primero Justicia Party polled surprisingly well and has a rising star in Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez. The two parties that dominated Venezuelan politics between 1948 and 1998, Accion Democratica (AD) and the Christian Democrats (COPEI), are mere relics. The CNE improved on its rock bottom reputation, while the military appears to be taking much of the heat for voting day irregularities. End Summary.

The Final Results

¶13. (U) The CNE declared President Chavez officially re-elected to another six-year term at a December 5 press conference. With 95 percent of the electronic ballots counted, the CNE updated its tabulated results and reported that Hugo Chavez received 7.1 million votes or 62.89 percent of the vote. Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales received 4.1 million votes or 36.85% of the vote. The CNE reported an abstention rate of 25.1 percent. Chavez polled more than 70 percent of the votes in eight of 23 states: Amazonas, Aragua, Cojedes, Delta Amacuro, Guarico, Monagas, Portuguesa, and Sucre. While he did not win any states outright, Rosales nearly won his home state of Zulia, generated more than 45% support in the western states of Merida and Tachira, and won slightly more than 40 percent in the states of Miranda and Nueva Esparta. Nueva Esparta is the only other state besides Zulia with an opposition governor.

¶4. (SBU) Judging by the geographical distribution of votes, there remains a high degree of correlation between socioeconomic class (as well as level of education) and voting preferences. Once again, Chavez did exceptionally well in poor and rural areas. Rosales mopped up in the upscale neighborhoods and ran much stronger in urban areas than in the countryside. With the exception of the state of Nueva Esparta, the Zulia Governor's campaign did not resonate in the eastern and Amazonian areas of Venezuela. Although he lost the Capital District of Caracas 63 percent to 37 percent, Rosales made some inroads in the working class neighborhoods of Caracas. He lost Petare, for example, by only seven points and Chavez polled more than 70 percent in only a fraction of Caracas parishes.

Winners

¶5. (C) The Chavez Election Machine. President Chavez won a decisive electoral victory. With 95% of the votes counted, Chavez won over seven million votes and 62.89 percent of the 11.5 million votes cast, both new highs for Chavez in terms of numbers of votes and percentage of the vote. He also carried Caracas and all 23 states, including Rosales' home state of Zulia. Chavez accomplished all this despite appearing to have lost some of his traditional luster on the campaign trail. For the first time in years, Chavez at times found himself on the defensive against the opposition. His campaign message vacillated between bombastic "revolutionary" rhetoric and the saccharine "For Love" PR campaign. Nevertheless, the formidable and well-financed Chavez election machine managed to get out the pro-Chavez vote and secure an easy Chavez victory on election day.

¶6. (C) Opposition Leader Manuel Rosales. Despite losing by 26 percentage points, Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales ran a

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strong campaign that succeeded in uniting the fractious opposition and generated real hope for the over four million Venezuelans who had been languishing in the political wilderness. By dint of his hard-fought and shrewd four-month campaign, Rosales has gone from a regional politician to become -- for now -- Venezuela's undisputed national opposition leader. His statesmanlike concession speech, as well as his constructive proposal to lead an opposition effort to make changes to the constitution (septel), injected into the opposition a degree of political maturity and responsibility that had been in scarce supply. While Rosales is not a natural orator or charmer on the campaign trail, he has won wide respect for his organizational, consensus-building, and leadership skills, as well as his ability to stay on message.

¶7. (C) The National Electoral Council (CNE). Given widespread public mistrust of the electoral body, the CNE had nowhere to go but up in the December 3 presidential election.

The CNE was relatively toothless in reining in governmental abuses of resources, personnel, and media in the run-up to election day and did not abandon the cumbersome and ineffective fingerprinting (digital scanner) machines. Nevertheless, CNE President Tibisay Lucena projected professionalism to the media and opposition, replacing the confrontational edge of her predecessor, Jorge Rodriguez. International and domestic observers largely commended the CNE's election day operations. Most importantly, the CNE's reported results coincided with independent tabulations and quick counts of observers and the opposition. The CNE also ordered an investigation into the BRV-funded Telesur TV network for broadcasting exit poll results before the first CNE announcement of results.

¶8. (C) Un Nuevo Tiempo Party (UNT). Prior to the presidential election, Rosales' Un Nuevo Tiempo Party was a

state party, unknown outside of Zulia. However, over 1.4 million Venezuelans voted for Rosales on the UNT ticket, the largest bloc of votes Rosales received from any single party and the second largest total election-wide after Chavez' Fifth Republic Movement (MVR). UNT was probably helped by the fact that it occupied the lower-right hand corner of the complicated 86-party electronic ballot. Moreover, Rosales deployed trusted Zulianos to lead his campaign in all 23 states giving the UNT the incipient beginnings of a nationwide organization. UNT party leader Angel Emiro Vera told the DCM during the campaign that he had urged Rosales for some time to try to make UNT a national party, but Rosales refused. Rosales now appears ready to do so.

¶19. (C) Primero Justicia Party (PJ). Despite a party schism early in the campaign, PJ leaders managed to work together on behalf of the Rosales campaign. Over 1.2 million Venezuelans voted for Rosales on the PJ ticket, by far the largest bloc of opposition votes after Un Nuevo Tiempo. PJ leader and former presidential candidate Julio Borges crowed to the media December 6 that PJ not only ran particularly strong in Caracas, its traditional base, but also out-polled UNT in 10 states. PJ leaders are openly discussing holding internal party elections during the first four months of 2007, but deep divisions in the party remain.

¶110. (C) Mayor Leopoldo Lopez. Thirty-five year-old Leopoldo Lopez, the Primero Justicia Mayor of the Chacao Burrough of Caracas, distinguished himself on the Rosales campaign. He played a big role in organizing Rosales' three successful mass rallies in Caracas, including the enormous November 25 rally on the Francisco Fajardo highway. Rosales won 76 percent of the vote in Chacao and won big in adjoining upper middle class neighborhoods. In addition, the telegenic and articulate Lopez served as a key campaign media spokesman. He is now even more widely regarded as one of the opposition's best hopes for the future. At the end of his term in 2008, however, Lopez faces a six-year prohibition on running for office for improperly diverting ear-marked federal funds to the municipal treasury. Lopez was not charged with profiting from the procedure; the diverted funds paid civil expenses and municipal salaries.

The Losers

¶111. (C) The Military. Chavez' campaign exhortation that the armed forces should be "rojo, rojito" ("red, really red") as well as scattered electoral incidents involving the military have likely undermined public perceptions of the neutrality

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of the Venezuelan military. While at most polling stations, military representatives did not exceed their mandate of providing security and assisting with logistics, international and domestic observers noted numerous complaints that "Plan Republica" officials kept polling stations open beyond regular voting hours in pro-Chavez areas and sometimes interfered in the administration in audits of printed voting receipts. Embassy election observers noticed that military personnel were also checking voters' identification cards at the entrance of many polling places.

¶112. (C) The Minor Pro-Chavez Parties. Chavez received more votes on the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) ticket than he did on the other pro-Chavez parties combined. PODEMOS, Patria Para Todos (PPT), and the Communist Party polled only some 700,000, 500,000, and 300,000 votes, respectively. During the campaign, Chavez announced his intention to form a single "revolutionary" party, and after the minor pro-Chavez parties' poor showing in this election, the MVR knives are already out. The pro-government daily "Vea" called December 7 for unity of "direction, organization, and policy" and editorialized that "fractionalism" is "unacceptable in the route toward Socialism in the 21st century."

¶13. (C) Accion Democratica (AD). AD Secretary General Henry Ramos Allup tried to impose a top-down abstentionist policy, but large numbers of the ADECO rank-and-file supported Rosales' candidacy. Leading Adeco dissident Alfonso Marquina, who served on Rosales' central campaign team, called publicly for badly needed internal reform of the AD party on December 6, but Ramos Allup announced to reporters the same day that AD had already expelled Marquina. Marquina sat right behind Rosales at Rosales' December 6 press conference and may help lead AD members to UNT. Moreover, by failing to participate in the December 2005 parliamentary elections and the presidential election, AD will have to collect signatures to be recertified as a political party. The 0.5 percent threshold (or 80,000 plus signatures) will pose no problem for AD, but will be a very visible reminder of Venezuela's once-great Social Democratic party's irrelevance.

¶14. (C) Other Traditional Parties. Venezuela's other historically dominant party, the Christian Democrats (COPEI), narrowly surpassed the one percent threshold for staying on the ballot automatically. COPEI contributed only 250,000 votes, or 2.2 percent, to Rosales, less than the Communist Party. The left-wing Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) was not so lucky, registering only some 68,000 votes for Rosales, less than the one percent threshold. MAS will either have to collect signatures to be recertified as a party or potentially merge with other opposition left-wing parties, such as Causa R, to try to revive itself.

Comment

¶15. (C) The run-up to the December 3 balloting was fraught with wild rumors, political accusations, and widespread fear of post-election violence. Consequently, Chavistas and Rosales voters alike welcomed with sighs of relief that the presidential election took place without major incidents or street battles. While Venezuela remains intensely polarized, there is a palpable reduction in political tensions as most Venezuelans turn their attention to the upcoming holiday season. Rosales deserves most of the credit for this temporary respite. It comes in the wake of his statesmanlike acceptance of electoral defeat and outlining a constructive program for continued opposition engagement (septel). In his December 5 post-election press conference, Chavez even paid Rosales a compliment -- by name. Rosales returned to Zulia December 6 to resume his duties as the governor of Zulia, and Chavez went on the road again in South America the same day. Both their camps are unlikely to man the domestic trenches in earnest until early in 2007.

WHITAKER